DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 478 798 HE 036 027

TITLE	Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions: An Overview.
INSTITUTION	North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Chicago, IL. Commission on Institutions of Higher Education.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	27p.; For the 1995 edition, see ED 390 318.
AVAILABLE FROM	North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, 30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400, Chicago, IL 60602-2504 ($1.50). Tel: 312-263-0456, ext. 119; Web site: http://www.ncacihe.org.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Accreditation (Institutions); *Accrediting Agencies; *Colleges; *Higher Education; *Institutional Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS	*North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

ABSTRACT

This booklet provides information about the accreditation of higher education institutions by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. It also identifies and responds to frequently asked questions about accreditation and lists resources available from the Commission. The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools is a not-for-profit voluntary membership organization of elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions committed to the improvement of education through evaluation and accreditation. This booklet describes general institutional requirements in regard to mission, authorization, governance, faculty, educational program, finances, and public information. It also discusses criteria for accreditation and describes the candidacy program, seeking affiliation, and appeals procedures if accreditation is denied. Frequently asked questions are listed. (SLD)

ENTIRE DOCUMENT:
POOR PRINT QUALITY

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ACCREDITATION

OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS:

AN OVERVIEW

ED 478 798

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S.E. Van Kollenberg

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

NCA

North Central Association
of Colleges and Schools

■

Commission on Institutions
of Higher Education

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The information contained in this document is accurate as of July 1, 1999.
Entire contents copyright 1999 by the Commission on Institutions of
Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.
All rights reserved.

Additional copies can be ordered for $1.50 from:

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400
Chicago, Illinois 60602-2504

312-263-0456, ext. 119 www.ncacihe.org

ACCREDITATION

OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS:

AN OVERVIEW

This pamphlet provides brief general information about the accreditation of higher education institutions by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, identifies and responds to frequently asked questions about accreditation, and lists resources available from the Commission.

Introduction 1
The North Central Association 1
The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education 2
- Statement of Mission 2

The Personnel of the Commission 3
Commission Programs and Services 4
Forms of Affiliation 4
The Evaluation Process 4
The General Institutional Requirements 5
- Mission 5
- Authorization 5
- Governance 6
- Faculty 6
- Educational Program 6
- Finances 7
- Public Information 7

The Criteria for Accreditation 7
- Criterion One 8
- Criterion Two 8
- Criterion Three 9
- Criterion Four 11
- Criterion Five 11

The Candidacy Program 12
Obligations of Affiliation 12
Seeking Initial Affiliation 13
Information Available to the Public 13
Filing a Complaint Against an Institution 14
Complaints Against the Commission 15
Frequently Asked Questions 15
For More Information 20
Publications Available from the Commission 21
On the Commission's Web Site 22

Introduction

In the United States, accreditation is voluntarily sought by institutions and is conferred by non-governmental bodies. There are two types of educational accreditation: **institutional** and **specialized**.

An institutional accrediting agency evaluates an entire institution in terms of its mission and the agency's standards or criteria. It accredits the institution as a whole. It reviews more than the educational offerings of the institution; it also assesses such characteristics as governance and administration, financial condition, admissions and student personnel processes, institutional resources, and relationships with outside communities. Institutional accreditation is provided by regional associations of schools and colleges (each named after the region in which it operates—Middle States, New England, North Central, Northwest, Southern, Western) and by several national associations that limit their scope to particular kinds of institutions. While independent of one another, the regional associations cooperate extensively and acknowledge one another's accreditation.

A specialized accrediting body evaluates particular units, schools, or programs within an institution. Specialized accreditation, also called program accreditation, is often associated with national professional associations, such as those for engineering, medicine, and law, or with specific disciplines, such as business, teacher education, psychology, or social work.

The North Central Association

The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools is a not-for-profit, voluntary, membership organization of elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions, founded in 1895, and committed to the improvement of education through evaluation and accreditation. According to its Articles of Incorporation:

> *The purpose of the association shall be the development and maintenance of high standards of excellence for universities, colleges, and schools, the continued improvement of the educational program and effectiveness of instruction on elementary, secondary, and college levels through a scientific and professional approach to the solution of educational problems, the establishment of cooperative relationships between the schools and colleges and universities within the territory of the association, and the maintenance of effective working relationships with other educational organizations and accrediting agencies.*

The Association serves colleges and schools in 19 states—Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia,

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Wisconsin, and Wyoming—and Department of Defense schools and Navajo Nation schools.

The Association is organized into two Commissions:

- The Commission on Schools, with its office in Tempe, Arizona, accredits institutions below the postsecondary degree-granting level. This Commission works extensively through state committees throughout the region.
- The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, with its office in Chicago, accredits degree-granting institutions of higher education.

The Board of Directors of the North Central Association consists of the officers of the Association and the members of the boards of its two Commissions.

The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education

The Commission adopted its current Statement of Mission on August 6, 1992:

Statement of Mission

The mission of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education is (1) to establish requirements and criteria for the accreditation of institutions of higher education and accredit institutions found to meet those requirements and criteria; (2) to strengthen educational and institutional quality through its assistance to its affiliated institutions, its evaluation processes, and its programs, publications, and research; (3) to advocate and exercise self-regulation in higher education through effective peer review; and (4) to provide to the public accurate information concerning the relationship of affiliated institutions with the Commission.

To fulfill its mission, the Commission:

- *monitors and evaluates institutions affiliated with it, to ensure that they continue to meet the Commission's requirements and criteria and strive to improve their institutional strength and the quality of the education they provide;*
- *prepares and disseminates publications, provides counsel, sponsors research, and conducts meetings directed toward the improvement of higher education;*
- *evaluates itself to assure that its policies and practices represent the best theory and practice of institutional accreditation, promote the self-regulation of institutions, and respond to the educational needs of society;*
- *provides a program of non-membership affiliation open to new or developing institutions of higher education that appear capable of achieving accreditation within a specific period of time;*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

- *involves educators from member institutions in all of its review and decision-making processes, and trains and evaluates them to ensure that their work is consistent and of high quality;*
- *serves the public by providing useful information about the role and purposes of accreditation, and by providing through its publications and other means timely and accurate information concerning affiliated institutions;*
- *honors the historical purposes of the North Central Association through its work with the Commission on Schools to strengthen the linkages between primary and secondary education and higher education;*
- *cooperates with other agencies that share the objectives of assuring the integrity and enhancing the quality of higher education.*

The Personnel of the Commission

The Commission's work is conducted by several groups:

- A **full-time staff** in the Commission office is responsible for implementing the Commission's programs and policies and coordinating all of its activities.
- More than 900 educators, selected for their experience and expertise from all types of accredited institutions throughout the North Central region, serve on the Commission's **Consultant-Evaluator** (C-E) Corps. C-Es serve as members of the evaluation teams that conduct site visits to institutions and participate in other Commission decision-making bodies.
- The **Accreditation Review Council** (ARC) includes at least 60 individuals who have been selected by the Board of Trustees to participate in the Commission's review processes as readers and on review committees. ARC members come from the C-E Corps; some are representatives of the public.
- The **Institutional Actions Council** includes 26 members chosen by the Board of Trustees to review institutional evaluations referred by readers, review committees, evaluators panels, and staff, and to make accrediting decisions. Twenty members are experienced C-Es who come from accredited institutions; six are representatives of the public.
- The **Board of Trustees** includes 15 members elected by the member institutions to serve as the policy-making body of the Commission. Twelve are from accredited institutions; three represent the public. The work of Trustees focuses on seven major areas: to establish, clarify and continually articulate the mission, expected outcomes, and values of the Commission (including both service to and leadership of the membership); to establish the framework in which accomplishment of the mission will be measured;

to evaluate overall accomplishment of the mission on a regular basis; to formulate policy and evaluate the effectiveness of both policies and processes; to envision and plan for the future; to be accountable for accrediting decisions; to assume fiscal responsibility for the organization and oversee financial matters; to connect with the organization's stakeholders; and to appoint, support, and evaluate the Executive Director.

The business meetings of the Board of Trustees are open to the public. Information about upcoming meetings is posted on the Commission's web site.

Commission Programs and Services

The Commission offers an extensive variety of programs and services to all its institutions. Each affiliated institution is assigned to a Commission staff liaison. These staff provide assistance to institutions and to evaluation teams during the self-study and evaluation processes; monitor institutions continuously through Annual Reports and institutional change processes, and offer other types of counsel.

The Commission's publications and its Annual Meeting are a major part of the effort to assist institutions. To inform all its constituencies, the Commission publishes a variety of materials on self-study, evaluation, and institutional improvement, including the *Handbook of Accreditation*, describing the policies and procedures for the accreditation process; the *Briefing* newsletter; and various other documents and articles. The Commission offers an extensive program on self-study, evaluation, and institutional improvement for institutions, C-Es, and others, as a part of the Annual Meeting of the North Central Association held each spring in Chicago. In Spring 1997, the Commission launched its web site to further strengthen communication with its various constituencies as well as with the general public. (See pp. 21–22 for further information about Commission publications and web site.)

Forms of Affiliation

Institutions of higher education may be affiliated with the Commission, and through it with the North Central Association, in either of two ways: by gaining and maintaining accredited status; or by gaining and maintaining candidacy, which is a limited-term, pre-accredited status. Both affiliations are voluntary. Currently, more than 980 institutions are affiliated with the Commission.

The Evaluation Process

The Commission's process of evaluation for both initial and continued accreditation is structured to determine whether an

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

institution meets the General Institutional Requirements (GIRs) and the Criteria for Accreditation. The evaluation process can be summarized as follows:

- The institution undertakes a self-study aimed at examining how it meets the GIRs and the Criteria. The results of the self-examination are summarized in a Self-Study Report that forms the basis for the Commission's evaluation. The completed Self-Study Report constitutes the institution's formal application for initial or continued accreditation.
- The institution is visited by a team of Consultant-Evaluators appointed by the Commission. This team gathers comprehensive information about the institution and summarizes its findings in a written Team Report. The Report assesses whether the institution satisfies the GIRs and the Criteria, offers advice and suggestions for improvement, and concludes with a formal recommendation for accreditation action. The institution has an opportunity to make a formal written response to the Team Report.
- Through a multi-tiered process, ARC members and IAC members make accrediting decisions based on the Self-Study Report and the Team Report, and in some cases meetings with representatives of the institution and team. When these reviews result in suggested changes in the team recommendation, the institution and the team chair have an opportunity to respond in writing.
- All decisions made by the ARC and IAC processes are validated by the Board of Trustees. The Board itself reviews and acts on those cases involving probation, denial or withdrawal of affiliation, and/or disputed cases involving initial candidacy or initial accreditation.

The General Institutional Requirements

An institution affiliated with the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools meets the following General Institutional Requirements:

Mission

1. It has a mission statement, formally adopted by the governing board and made public, declaring that it is an institution of higher education.
2. It is a degree-granting institution.

Authorization

3. It has legal authorization to grant its degrees, and it meets all the legal requirements to operate as an institution of higher education wherever it conducts its activities.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

4. It has legal documents to confirm its status: not-for-profit, for-profit, or public.

Governance

5. It has a governing board that possesses and exercises necessary legal power to establish and review basic policies that govern the institution.
6. Its governing board includes public members and is sufficiently autonomous from the administration and ownership to assure the integrity of the institution.
7. It has an executive officer designated by the governing board to provide administrative leadership for the institution.
8. Its governing board authorizes the institution's affiliation with the Commission.

Faculty

9. It employs a faculty that has earned from accredited institutions the degrees appropriate to the level of instruction offered by the institution.
10. A sufficient number of the faculty are full-time employees of the institution.
11. Its faculty has a significant role in developing and evaluating all of the institution's educational programs.

Educational Program

12. It confers degrees. (Note: for candidate institutions that have yet to graduate a student, it is sufficient to show that the institution has a plan and timetable ensuring that it will confer degrees within the candidacy period.)
13. It has degree programs in operation, with students enrolled in them.
14. Its degree programs are compatible with the institution's mission and are based on recognized fields of study at the higher education level.
15. Its degrees are appropriately named, following practices common to institutions of higher education in terms of both length and content of the programs.
16. Its undergraduate degree programs include a coherent general education requirement consistent with the institution's mission and designed to ensure breadth of knowledge and to promote intellectual inquiry.
17. It has admission policies and practices that are consistent with the institution's mission and appropriate to its educational programs.
18. It provides its students access to those learning resources and support services for its degree programs.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Finances

19. It has an external financial audit by a certified public accountant or a public audit agency at least every two years.

20. Its financial documents demonstrate the appropriate allocation and use of resources to support its educational programs.

21. Its financial practices, records, and reports demonstrate fiscal viability.

Public Information

22. Its catalog or other official documents include its mission statement along with accurate descriptions of its educational programs and degree requirements; its academic calendars; its learning resources; its admissions policies and practices; its academic and non-academic policies and procedures directly affecting students; its charges and refund policies; and the academic credentials of its faculty and administrators.

23. It accurately discloses its standing with accrediting bodies with which it is affiliated.

24. It makes available upon request information that accurately describes its financial condition.

The Commission provides a fuller explanation of its expectations for each GIR in the *Handbook of Accreditation*, published and available from the Commission office.

The Criteria for Accreditation

In addition to the General Institutional Requirements, an institution accredited by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education demonstrates that it satisfies five Criteria for Accreditation.

To assist those involved in making judgments about affiliation, the Commission provides a list of typical areas of institutional activity or concern that form a "Pattern of Evidence" related directly to the satisfaction of each of the five criteria. These indicators illustrate characteristic varieties of evidence that an institution might present in building its case and that the Commission's processes weigh in making a decision.

These indicators are not "checklists," nor are they exhaustive; they are broad descriptions of the kind of concerns and issues the Commission considers when making a holistic decision on each criterion. Not every indicator will be critical for every institution; many institutions include additional indicators of their success in fulfilling the criteria.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The five Criteria for Accreditation are:

Criterion 1. The institution has clear and publicly stated purposes consistent with its mission and appropriate to an institution of higher education.

In determining appropriate patterns of evidence for this criterion, the Commission considers evidence such as:

- long- and short-range institutional and educational goals;
- processes, involving its constituencies, through which the institution evaluates its purposes;
- decision-making processes that are appropriate to its stated mission and purposes;
- understanding of the stated purposes by institutional constituencies;
- efforts to keep the public informed of its institutional and educational goals through documents such as the catalog and program brochures;
- support for freedom of inquiry for faculty and students;
- institutional commitment to excellence, both in the teaching provided by faculty and the learning expected of students.

Criterion 2. The institution has effectively organized the human, financial, and physical resources necessary to accomplish its purposes.

In determining appropriate patterns of evidence for this criterion, the Commission considers evidence such as:

- governance by a board consisting of informed people who understand their responsibilities, function in accordance with stated board policies, and have the resolve necessary to preserve the institution's integrity;
- effective administration through well-defined and understood organizational structures, policies, and procedures;
- qualified and experienced administrative personnel who oversee institutional activities and exercise appropriate responsibility for them;
- systems of governance that provide dependable information to the institution's constituencies and, as appropriate, involve them in the decision-making processes;
- faculty with educational credentials that testify to appropriate preparation for the courses they teach;
- a sufficient number of students enrolled to meet the institution's stated educational purposes;
- provision of services that afford all admitted students the opportunity to succeed;

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

- a physical plant that supports effective teaching and learning;
- conscientious efforts to provide students with a safe and healthy environment;
- academic resources and equipment (e.g., libraries, electronic services and products, learning resource centers, laboratories and studios, computers) adequate to support the institution's purposes;
- a pattern of financial expenditures that shows the commitment to provide both the environment and the human resources necessary for effective teaching and learning;
- management of financial resources to maximize the institution's capability to meet its purposes.

Criterion 3. The institution is accomplishing its educational and other purposes.

In determining appropriate patterns of evidence for this criterion, the Commission considers evidence such as:

- educational programs appropriate to an institution of higher education:
  - courses of study in the academic programs that are clearly defined, coherent, and intellectually rigorous;
  - programs that include courses and/or activities whose purpose is to stimulate the examination and understanding of personal, social, and civic values;
  - programs that require of the faculty and students (as appropriate to the level of the educational program) the use of scholarship and/or the participation in research as part of the programs;
  - programs that require intellectual interaction between student and faculty and encourage it between student and student.
- assessment* of appropriate student academic achievement in all its programs, documenting:
  - proficiency in skills and competencies essential for all college-educated adults;
  - completion of an identifiable and coherent undergraduate level general education component;
  - mastery of the level of knowledge appropriate to the degree granted; and

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

* Significant additional information on assessment and graduate education is provided in the *Handbook of Accreditation*. Excerpts of these sections are available through the on-line version of the *Overview*.

- control by the institution's faculty of evaluation of student learning and granting of academic credit.

- graduate programs* that:
  - distinguish clearly graduate from undergraduate offerings;
  - expect students and faculty to value and engage in research, scholarship, and creative activity;
  - restrict graduate academic credit for prior learning to credit validated by examination, credit based on documented faculty evaluation of a portfolio of original work products, or credit awarded by an institution of higher education either affiliated with a recognized U.S. accrediting association or approved by an appropriate national ministry of education;
  - are approved, taught, and evaluated by a graduate faculty that possesses appropriate credentials and experience; and
  - use results of regular internal and external peer review processes to ensure quality.
- transcripts that accurately reflect student learning and follow commonly accepted practices;
- effective teaching that characterizes its courses and academic programs;
- ongoing support for professional development for faculty, staff, and administrators;
- student services that effectively support the institution's purposes;
- staff and faculty service that contributes to the institution's effectiveness;
- if appropriate:
  - evidence of support for the stated commitment to basic and applied research through provision of sufficient human, financial, and physical resources to produce effective research;
  - evidence of support for the stated commitment to the fine and creative arts through provision of sufficient human, financial, and physical resources to produce creative endeavors and activities;
  - evidence of effective delivery of educational and other services to its community;
  - evidence of development and offering of effective courses and programs to meet the needs of its sponsoring organization and other special constituencies.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Criterion 4. The institution can continue to accomplish its purposes and strengthen its educational effectiveness.

In determining appropriate patterns of evidence for this criterion, the Commission considers evidence such as:

- a current resource base—financial, physical, and human—that positions the institution for the future;
- decision-making processes with tested capability of responding effectively to anticipated and unanticipated challenges to the institution;
- structured assessment processes that are continuous; that involve a variety of institutional constituencies; and that provide meaningful and useful information to the planning processes, as well as to students, faculty, and administration;
- plans as well as ongoing, effective planning processes necessary to the institution's continuance;
- clear identification of how the institution can strengthen its educational programs;
- resources organized and allocated to support its plans for strengthening both the institution and its programs.

Criterion 5. The institution demonstrates integrity in its practices and relationships.

In determining appropriate patterns of evidence for this criterion, the Commission considers evidence such as:

- student, faculty, and staff handbooks that describe various institutional relationships with those constituencies, including appropriate grievance procedures;
- policies and practices for the resolution of internal disputes within the institution's constituency;
- policies and practices consistent with its mission related to equity of treatment, nondiscrimination, affirmative action, and other means of enhancing access to education and the building of a diverse educational community;
- institutional publications, statements, and advertising that describe accurately and fairly the institution, its operations, and its programs;
- relationships with other institutions of higher education conducted ethically and responsibly;
- appropriate support for resources shared with other institutions;
- policies and procedures regarding institutional relationships with and responsibility for intercollegiate ath-

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

letics, student associations, and subsidiary or related business enterprises;

- oversight processes for monitoring contractual arrangements with government, industry, and other organizations.

While the Criteria are intentionally general, the judgments concerning them are founded on careful and detailed examination of the specifics of the institution. Their generality ensures that accreditation decisions focus on the particulars of each institution's own purposes, rather than on trying to make institutions fit a preestablished mold. The widely different purposes and scopes of educational institutions demand that the criteria by which an institutional accrediting body makes its judgments be broad enough to encompass this diversity, and indeed support innovation, yet be clear enough to ensure acceptable quality.

The Candidacy Program

The Commission's candidacy program, as described in the *Handbook of Accreditation*, makes explicit the following expectations for all candidate institutions:

> *An applying institution must demonstrate that it meets the General Institutional Requirements. In addition, it will be measured against the Criteria for Accreditation. An institution seeking candidacy will document, through its self-study, the degree to which it meets each of the five Criteria, and, through a carefully articulated plan and timetable, will show how it intends to meet fully each of them within the four-year period of candidacy.*

To achieve candidacy, an institution will be expected to provide an emerging pattern of evidence for each criterion. Throughout the candidacy period Evaluation Teams evaluate and address in their reports whether the institution is progressively demonstrating the patterns of evidence needed to achieve accreditation before the end of the candidacy period.

Obligations of Affiliation

In addition to meeting the General Institutional Requirements and the Criteria for Accreditation or the Candidacy Program, all affiliated institutions voluntarily agree to meet *obligations of affiliation*, including hosting periodic reviews, payment of dues and fees, and submission of reports—including an Annual Report—as requested by the Commission.

Every institution must have its accreditation reaffirmed not later than five years after it has been initially granted and not later than 10 years following each subsequent reaffirmation. Candidate institutions are evaluated biennially. Accreditation is not for a specific period of time but is a continuing relation-

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ship between the institution and the Commission that is subject to periodic review. Focused visits or reports may be required between comprehensive visits, and Annual Reports and other information from institutions are regularly examined to see whether changes have occurred (or are anticipated) that would necessitate a change in the timing of the next evaluation. In addition, an institution is required to notify the Commission in writing before initiating any change that might alter its relationship with the Commission and to obtain approval of the change before initiating it.

Seeking Initial Affiliation

An institution pursuing affiliation with the Commission participates in the Eligibility Process. The Process requires staff consultation with an institution before the institution makes the official decision to seek affiliation. Once consultation has taken place, and the institution has decided to go forward with the process of seeking affiliation, the Preliminary Information Form (PIF) and accompanying documentation submitted by the institution are reviewed by a panel of Consultant-Evaluators. The panel will determine whether the institution has presented convincing evidence from which an Evaluation Team might be able to conclude that each of the General Institutional Requirements is met. If the evidence is of sufficient weight and quality, the panel will determine that a visit by an Evaluation Team is warranted. The on-site team determines whether the General Institutional Requirements are actually met and makes a recommendation for initial status, either candidacy or accreditation.

Non-affiliated institutions seeking to affiliate with the Commission may contact the Commission office to request an Eligibility Process Packet, which includes information on seeking affiliation, including costs and a sample timetable.

Information Available to the Public

The Commission maintains a Record of Status and Scope (RSS) for each affiliated institution. The RSS contains two sections: the Statement of Affiliation Status (SAS) and the Statement of Institutional Scope and Activities (SISA). The SAS contains, in summary format, language describing the institution's official relationship with the Commission; this language is recommended by an Evaluation Team and officially adopted through the Commission's processes. The SISA contains institutional characteristics in areas such as legal structure, number of degrees offered at each level, enrollment, off-campus offerings, and distance delivery. Information on the SISA is taken from the Annual Report provided by each institution to the Commission and is not officially reviewed or adopted by the Commission.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Commission publishes the list of affiliated institutions on its web site; the full RSSs will be available on the site in late 1999. Formerly published annually in a volume of the *NCA Quarterly*, this new format will allow for frequent updating. Individual RSSs are also available on request from the Commission office. In certain situations the Commission may also issue a Public Disclosure Notice to explain a particular relationship with an institution.

Filing a Complaint Against an Institution

The Commission considers complaints against an affiliated institution if the complaints raise questions about the institution's ability to fulfill the Commission's General Institutional Requirements and Criteria for Accreditation. *(See Requirements and Criteria, pp. 5–12.)*

The Commission does not act on individual grievances (e.g., grade disputes, problems with a specific faculty member, financial aid difficulties, differing interpretations of contracts) unless documentation can be submitted to show that the institution provided students with unclear or inadequate information in written handbooks or catalogs. All institutions are expected to have grievance procedures to deal with these individual grievances, and those procedures should be fully used.

If institutional grievance processes fail or are not available for certain grievances, the complainant may write to the Commission and file a formal complaint that consists of:

- a signed letter explaining the problem;
- documentation to substantiate the complaint;
- permission to forward the complaint to the president of the institution;
- full disclosure about any other external channels the complainant is pursuing. This information is necessary to allow the Commission to decide an appropriate response to complaints currently being considered by other agencies (including courts) when the complaints appear to raise grave concerns about educational quality.

When the Commission office receives a written, signed complaint, it forwards the complaint (with the complainant's permission) to the president of the named institution. If confidentiality is an issue, the complainant may request that the Commission summarize the complaint and keep the name confidential.

- When the complaint raises issues of Commission concern, the institutional president is asked to respond to the Commission office.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

- When the complaint does not raise issues of Commission concern, the Commission forwards the complaint so that the CEO knows that the Commission is aware of the complaint. A formal response is not required.

Complaints Against the Commission

The Commission encourages feedback on its work from all of its stakeholders. Such exchanges provide valuable information for the improvement of Commission requirements, policies, and processes. However, the Commission recognizes that there may be some circumstances in which individuals or groups may choose to provide their comments in the form of a complaint. Therefore, the Board has adopted a policy on formal complaints against the Commission. To be considered as a formal complaint against the Commission, a complaint must involve issues broader than concern about a specific institutional action or a specific team. The document must state clearly the nature of the complaint, and it must be signed. The Executive Director, on behalf of the Commission, responds to each complaint made against the Commission within 30 days; reports regularly to the Executive Committee and the Board of Trustees on the nature and disposition of complaints; and compiles annually a list, available to the public on request, that summarizes the complaints and their dispositions. Upon advice of counsel, the Commission retains the right to withhold public disclosure of information if potential legal action is involved in the complaint.

The Commission office advises the complainant of the Commission's disposition of the complaint.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is accreditation?

A. Accreditation by the Commission and by other nationally recognized agencies provides assurance to the public, in particular to prospective students, that an institution has been found to meet the agency's clearly stated requirements and criteria and that there are reasonable grounds for believing that it will continue to meet them.

Q. What is the value of accreditation?

A. Accreditation provides both public certification of acceptable institutional quality as well as an opportunity and incentive for self-improvement in the institutions accredited. The Commission reaches the conclusion that an institution meets its requirements and criteria only after the institution opens itself to outside examination conducted by experienced evaluators familiar with accrediting re-

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

quirements and with higher education. Moreover, for the accredited institution, the process of accreditation provides an opportunity for critical self-analysis leading to improvement in quality and for consultation and advice from persons from other institutions.

Q. What is the difference between regional accreditation and state licensure?

A. While many states have established regulations that must be met before an institution may operate, in most states such regulations represent a minimum basis for protection of students. State authorization should not be confused with institutional or specialized accreditation. An institution may have state authorization to operate, but it may not necessarily be accredited by an institutional or specialized accrediting association. In fact, an institution must have the appropriate authorization by a state to operate before it can seek a status with the Commission.

Q. Why doesn't the Commission rank colleges?

A. The purpose of accreditation is to provide public assurance of educational quality and institutional integrity. Various publications have begun institution ranking processes based on such factors as specific numerical details (e.g., size, tuition, and endowment), faculty selectivity, and public opinion. It is important to remember that colleges and universities differ from one another in significant ways, including mission, programs offered, and students served. Therefore, the important issue for each student is whether the college meets the student's needs. Published rankings may be one source of information, but they should not be the only source.

Q. Why doesn't the Commission recommend colleges to students?

A. Selection of a college to attend is a decision that must be made individually. There are so many different types of institutions (small, large, single-program, multiple-program, urban, rural, public, private, etc.) that matching the student's interests and abilities to the characteristics of a college requires detailed information about the student and the institution. Information about colleges may be found in various books and directories (available in many libraries), and students are advised to consult with counselors or advisors in secondary schools. The admissions officers of colleges often are able to provide assistance, although they will have the most knowledge of the institution they represent. Increasingly, useful college information can be found through the Internet. The information available from the Commission is limited to that describing the institution's status with the Commission.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Q. Does accreditation include distance education courses and programs?

A. Yes. The Commission accredits a number of institutions that offer courses and programs through various methods of distance delivery. Since the Commission accredits institutions rather than individual programs, it does not maintain listings of such programs. The Commission does provide a list of Internet resources on distance education on its web site. The Record of Status and Scope indicates whether the institution offers courses or programs through distance delivery. The RSSs currently are available in print form only; they will be available on the web site in late 1999. In addition, the Commission has developed principles of good practice as guidelines for those institutions that may offer courses or programs through distance delivery. The guidelines are available on the Commission's web site.

Q. Does accreditation guarantee that credits and degrees can be transferred to another institution?

A. No. Transferability of credits and degrees is a matter determined by the institution receiving the credits. Transferability depends on several factors. Among them are: the institution at which credits or degrees were earned; how well the credits offered for transfer mesh with the curriculum offered by the institution to which the student wishes to transfer; and how well the student did in the courses. Accreditation speaks only to the first of these factors and, therefore, cannot by itself guarantee transfer of credits; however, many institutions choose to accept transfer credits only from accredited institutions so that transfer of credits from an unaccredited institution may be excluded. Some institutions have specific agreements with other institutions guaranteeing transfer of credits. Although the Commission's accreditation includes an institution's "non-traditional" courses (e.g., distance delivered, correspondence, Internet, etc.) some institutions choose to treat credits gained in those courses differently.

Students should be skeptical of any institution that makes unqualified assertions that its credits will transfer to all other institutions. Anyone planning to transfer credits should, at the earliest opportunity, consult the receiving institution about the transfer—before taking the courses for transfer, if possible.

Q. Does candidacy assure accreditation?

A. No. The Commission does not grant candidacy to an institution unless it has strong evidence that the institution can achieve accreditation within the candidacy period. However, attainment of candidacy does not automatically assure eventual accreditation. The maximum length of candidacy is four years.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Q. What is the difference between institutional accreditation and program accreditation?

A. Institutional accreditation speaks to the overall quality of the institution without making judgments about specific programs. Institutional accreditation is accreditation of the *whole* institution, including all programs, sites, and methods of delivery. The accreditation of individual programs, such as those preparing students to practice a profession, is different and is carried out by "specialized" or "program" accrediting bodies that apply specific standards for curriculum and course content.

The Commission does not maintain lists of programs offered by its accredited institutions. Each specialized accrediting body publishes a list of programs it accredits. This information also is shown in the annual directory, *Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education*, published by the American Council on Education, available in many libraries. College catalogs usually note all the program accreditations.

Q. Does the Commission invite comments on its requirements and criteria for accreditation?

A. In fall 1998 the Commission introduced a validity and listening program specifically to invite comments on its requirements and criteria. Currently, the best way to provide comments is through a questionnaire that is posted on the Commission's web site. In the future, the program will be expanded to include other opportunities for input and discussion by various stakeholder groups.

Q. Who evaluates the Commission?

A. The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a national, nongovernmental organization that provides recognition of accrediting bodies, as does the United States Department of Education.

Prior to the formation of CHEA in 1996, CHEA's predecessors recognized the Commission: the Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA) 1994–1996, and the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) from its formation in 1974 through 1993. Since CORPA granted a five-year term of renewal of recognition to the Commission in 1996, the Commission's next evaluation will be conducted by CHEA in 2001.

The U.S. Secretary of Education maintains a list of accrediting bodies determined by the Secretary to be "reliable authorities as to the quality of training offered by educational institutions and programs." The Secretary's list serves as a basis of determining eligibility for participation in federally funded programs, including student

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

financial aid. To appear on the list, an accrediting body must demonstrate its compliance with a series of criteria established by the Secretary in accordance with the Higher Education Act. The Secretary reviews the status of accrediting bodies on the list on a regular schedule. The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association has been listed by the Secretary of Education (or a predecessor officer) since 1952 when the first list was published. Its most recent review was in 1997.

The Commission also has a variety of ways to evaluate its own processes:

- participants provide routine evaluation of accreditation processes
- C-Es and institutions evaluate team performance
- institutions and others respond to surveys on the quality of programs and services
- focus groups and task forces address specific issues and challenges
- stakeholders share comments through Commission listening posts

Recognition by CHEA and the U.S. Department of Education provides evaluation of the effectiveness of the Commission's ongoing program of self-evaluation.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

For More Information

For further information about the North Central Association, write or call the appropriate Commission office.

For institutions of higher education:

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400
Chicago, Illinois 60602-2504
(800) 621-7440 or (312) 263-0456
Fax: (312) 263-7462
info@ncacihe.org
http://www.ncacihe.org

For elementary and secondary schools:

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
Commission on Schools
c/o Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona 85287-3011
(800) 525-9517 or (602) 965-8700
Fax: (602) 965-9423
nca@nca.asu.edu
http://www.nca.asu.edu

For further information about institutional and specialized accreditation (including names and addresses of accrediting bodies) write or call:

Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)
One Dupont Circle, N.W., Suite 510
Washington D.C. 20036-1135
(202) 955-6126
Fax: (202) 955-6129
chea@chea.org
http://www.chea.org

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Publications Available from the Commission

- ☐ *A Handbook of Accreditation.* This document is addressed to institutions affiliated with the Commission, those seeking affiliation, and the Consultant-Evaluators involved in the various decision-making processes. It documents the policies and procedures related to the evaluation and accreditation processes of the Commission. $18.00.

- ☐ *A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement.* This publication includes papers from the CIHE Annual Meeting programs that provide advice and suggestions on self-study and address a wide variety of topics related to accreditation, assessment of student academic achievement, institutional improvement, and other current higher education issues. $20.00.

- ☐ *Briefing.* The Commission newsletter is published three times each year. *Briefing* is an invaluable resource for institutions and evaluators who need to be informed of Commission activities. Individual copies: $3.50. Subscription: $10.00/year.

- ☐ *Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions: An Overview.* This pamphlet provides general information about the accreditation of postsecondary institutions by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. $1.50.

- ☐ Guidelines. From time to time, the Commission adopts guidelines on specific areas, such as international education and distance education. Call the Commission office or visit the Commission's web site for information on current guidelines.

All prices are subject to change.
Check the Commission's web site
for a current list of publications:

www.ncacihe.org

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

On the Commission's Web Site

Check the Commission's web site for the most current information as well as an increasing variety of resources.

- ☐ Overview information about accreditation, including information about applying for affiliation, the Commission's complaint procedures, and frequently asked questions
- ☐ Information about the Commission's Academic Quality Improvement Project
- ☐ Searchable directory of currently and historically accredited institutions
- ☐ Information on distance learning programs for students
- ☐ Policies and procedures, including current policies, proposed policy changes, current procedures, bylaws, and federal compliance information
- ☐ Statements of good practices
- ☐ Selected papers by staff, Annual Meeting speakers, and others
- ☐ Links to other web sites related to accreditation
- ☐ Resources for members of the Consultant-Evaluator Corps
- ☐ Information on how to become a Consultant-Evaluator
- ☐ Calendar of upcoming meetings
- ☐ On-line publications ordering
- ☐ Annual Meeting resources, program information, and on-line registration
- ☐ Rosters of Trustees and Commission staff

www.ncacihe.org

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education

30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400
Chicago, Illinois 60602-2504

(800) 621-7440
fax: (312) 263-7462
e-mail: info@ncacihe.org
http://www.ncacihe.org

July 1999

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

X	This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.
	This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").